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P-Thayer, George

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Guilty Men

CORINNA ADAM

The War Business by GEORGE THAYER
Weidenfeld & Nicolson 50s

Perhaps it is because public fear is concentrated on the Bomb and its monstrous offspring that we know so little about the trade in conventional arms. Maybe we secretly regard ordinary guns and bombs and fighter planes as, if not good things, at least acceptable alternatives. But certainly one reason for lay ignorance is the extraordinary complexity of the subject, the way it has become a field in which only experts can communicate with each other, in jargon. So any attempt to draw the threads together in a way outsiders can understand is welcome: and that is what this book, albeit somewhat inelegantly, succeeds in doing.

For one generation, the image of the private arms-dealer was imprinted forever by Low's cartoons and Brecht's words. In return, the dealers themselves have invented a new picture with (one imagines) heavy recourse to James Bond thrillers and television serials. The most famous, and infinitely the most powerful of these fantasy-figures of real life is Sam Cummings of Interarms. His employees are dressed in the latest job-lot of old uniforms (Afrika Korps one week, Royal Navy the next), and sometimes refer to themselves as 'Your friendly neighbourhood merchants of death'. Cummings sends telegrams to his agents in mock-Southern dialect, and has jocularly given several of his subsidiary companies names with the initials 'CIA'.

But such individuals are the front men who distract attention from the real death-merchants; and they, of course, are the governments of the advanced countries, in particular the United States. The author Names the Guilty Men in the best tradition of exposure journalism, and spends a good deal of his book discussing Henry John Kuss. Mr Kuss is the civil servant who runs the International Logistics Negotiations Section of the International Security Affairs Division of the Department of Defense. That is, he is America's chief arms salesman: \$2 billion-worth a year in defence of the free world. Mr Kuss assured the author that he would never sell equipment to a country that

'could not afford it or should not have it'. Yet the evidence that he does, amassed by the author in necessary if somewhat indigestible lumps, is incontrovertible. (For example, the interest which developing countries had to pay back, in 1964, on their hire-purchase weaponry equalled half all the new economic aid they received that year.) It seems the Defense Department is self-perpetuating and unstoppable.

If the paradox that aid and arms are inextricably linked were not enough, here is another. Arms manufacturers (mostly, now, not famous identifiable figures as in the Low cartoons, but sections of industrial firms better known for more innocent products - General Electric, General Motors, Hispano-Suiza, Remington) do not like war. They like 'stability': they like the trade in death to be carried on in good business conditions. The moment there was a hint of peace in Vietnam, last year, arms shares rebounded upwards from a slow decline. Long wars, being inflationary, worry armament manufacturers. They cannot be sure, as they would be if the Vietnam war came to an end, that the American government will concentrate hard enough on its arrangements for selling steadily increasing amounts of arms to poor countries that are at peace.

Ninety-five per cent of all conflicts since the Second World War have been fought in the underdeveloped areas of the world, with imported weapons. Mr Thayer pleads, rightly, for tightening up the resale regulations, now flouted almost daily; for some sort of control commission; for the UN at least to keep records of arms deals. But he goes on to reason that, since none of these wars could have been fought without weapons, *therefore* the arms trade is to blame for them all - for Korea and for Vietnam, for Indonesia and for Biafra, for Cyprus and for Kashmir. It is too simple to collectivise these conflicts; it lets the really guilty men off the hook. Just as it is not generals who are ultimately responsible for wars, but politicians, so the guns are not to blame, nor the soldiers. The rich countries use the poor to settle their quarrels for them. It is the ideologies which kill.